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ABSTRACT

This booklet, which was produced as a follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, examines the politics and policies of the education of adults in a globally transforming society. After a brief overview of the three-part workshop from which the booklet emerged, the following issues and challenges facing adult education within the context of global economic transformation are considered: the diminishing validity of the old paradigm of development as an endless upward path; transformation in former socialist countries; transformations in work; processes of democratization throughout the world; and erosion of the nation state. Discussed in an examination of the crucial role of adult learning in addressing the key issues confronting societies are the following topics: promoting political skills and active citizenship; networking among adult learning initiatives; new roles for adults that require higher level competencies; a broader view of adult learning; and policy strategies. The following are among the points made in the booklet's conclusion: (1) the present global transformation is far from being an equitable and sustainable development; (2) the issues confronting adult educators are structural, legislative, and distributive rather than technical or curricular; (3) local experiences should guide practice and policy; (4) sharing experiences and learning from others are increasingly important. (MN)

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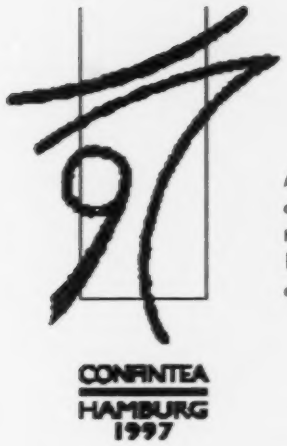

A series of 29 booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education

2e Politics and policies

The politics and policies of the education of adults in a globally transforming society

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This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

Readers are reminded that the points of view, selection of facts, and the opinions expressed in the booklets are those that were raised by panellists, speakers and participants during the workshop sessions and therefore do not necessarily coincide with official positions of the UNESCO or of the UNESCO Institute for Education Hamburg. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UNESCO Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitations of the frontiers of any country or territory.

Theme 2: Improving conditions and quality of adult learning

Booklets under this theme:

2a Universities and the future of adult learning

2b The multiplicity of research on 'Learning for All', a key for the 21st century

2c Global community of adult learning through information and documentation: developing a network of networks

2d Monitoring adult learning for knowledge-based policy-making

2e The politics and policies of the education of adults in a globally transforming society

UNESCO Institute for Education
Feldbrunnenstrasse 58
D-20148 Hamburg
Germany

Tel.: (+49 40) 44 80 41-0
Fax: (+49 40) 410 77 23

e-mail: uie@unesco.org

homepage: http://www.education.unesco.org/uie

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Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference The Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

The politics and policies of the education of adults in a globally transforming society

Introduction

Humanity is undergoing a massive transformation from the age of industrial production to the age of information and communications. History has known other transformations, but this one is taking place much more rapidly and is involving much greater numbers of people than ever before. In the process humankind is being confronted with new global risks. Adult learning is one area where these developments have important implications. While researchers, policy makers, the media and much of the public are aware of these transformations, the profound nature of the change has not been sufficiently taken into account in adult learning policy.

The workshop session "Politics and Policies of the Education of Adults in a Globally Transforming Society", held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), discussed the changes which adults have to confront, their effects on different groups of people, and the policy options available in dealing with them.

The workshop was divided into three parts. The first part addressed the nature and scope of the global transformation taking place. Chair was Eric Bockstael, Wayne State University, U.S.A. Speakers included: Harbans S. Bhola, University of Indiana at Bloomington, USA; Sheri Hamilton, National Literacy Coalition, South Africa; Talvi Marja, Tallinn University, Estonia; Gloria Ramirez, Mexican Human Rights Academy, Mexico; Walter Uegama, University of British Colombia, Canada.

At the second session the question raised was: Is adult learning the right response? This session was chaired by Talvi Marja and the panel of speakers featured: Keith Forrester, University of Leeds; Jozsef Katus, European Symposium on Voluntary Associations; Rodolfo Martinez, Wayne State University; Daphne Ntiri, Wayne State University, U.S.A.; Rifat Okcabol, Bogazici University, Turkey; Jean-Claude Quenum, Voix d'Afrique Formation, Benin/France; Dimitrs Vergidis, University of Patras, Greece and Keith McLeod, University of Toronto, Canada.

The third part of the workshop dealt with the strategies and organisational structures required at both local and international levels. Chair was Harbans S. Bhola. The following speakers were on the panel: José Asun, University of Barcelona; Ettore Gelpi, International League of Education, France/Italy; Gunther Ghere and Karel de Witte, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; Pierre Leboutte and Lucien Pieret, Parthages, Belgium; Walter Temeline, University of Windsor, Canada; Mara Ustinova, Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology, Russia; Mitja Zagar, Ethnic Institute, Slovenia; Lucien Peiret, Vocational Institute, Belgium; George Cushingberry jr. and Tony Perry, Michigan Ethnic Heritage Centre, USA.

The workshop represented all sectors of the adult community – researchers, policy makers, practitioners, the media and the public. It emerged clearly from these discussions that adult learning needs to be taken out of its previous marginal role and given a much more central place in policy-making. The growing gap between the social demand for education of adults and the resources available to meet these needs makes the question of policy central to the current discussion regarding adult learning.

Issues and challenges in the context of global transformation

The massive changes in nearly all aspects of life which people worldwide are confronted with are elements of a great transformation. Although there are a number of political, economic and social developments taking place, the deep structure of inequality persists, both within the countries of the North and the South, and particularly between the North and the South. The majority of the world's population is paying a heavy price for economic globalisation.

The impact of the global shift to a new information and communications age is everywhere influencing peoples' lives but in very different ways. Given the advanced technologies involved, the transformations can have greater implications for the physical and social environment than any previous transformation. A major issue for policy and practice in adult learning is to address the human costs and benefits of the past transformations.

Taking issue with the development model

The old development paradigm, which saw development as an endless upward path, is no longer valid. It is now obvious that the world is more unequal than ever, the disparities between the rich and the poor have increased, and we are consuming energy faster than we are creating it. Furthermore the majority of the world's population is paying a heavy price for economic globalisation. If human society is to find a better way forward, a massive education process is needed – education about the limits to growth, about the threats inherent in the old development model, about possible ways of creating a more hopeful future for the world and its inhabitants. A large part of this educational effort will be the task of adult educators.

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Transformation in former socialist countries

Former socialist countries have had to cope with a radical transformation from totalitarianism to democracy and from command economies to the free market. This process is happening at a time of economic and political integration in Europe. In this context, adult learning policies have to:

1 safeguard the cultural heritage and identity of peoples and communities threatened by the homogenising influences of the changes mentioned above;
2 train them to be equal and active participants in the global economy.

Transformations in work

With the world-wide swing to neo-liberal economic policies, unemployment is growing, and education is becoming increasingly privatised or subjected to the calculations of the market. Consequently, many people are being excluded from education. There is also a growing danger that migrants, refugees and other minority groups will become special categories within adult education programmes that should be meant for all. Furthermore, there is an increasing tendency to see adult learning as a matter of vocational training and human resource development.

A new understanding of education is now called for – an approach that promotes inner enrichment but at the same time develops the flexibility that is necessary in the modern world of work. Up till now, policy-making has followed the human capital development approach and has not relied on the accumulated expertise of popular pedagogy in different countries. Critical thinking and learning skills are needed more than before. Equally important is to develop awareness of ecological and cultural issues.

Processes of democratisation in the world

Many countries, such as South Africa post-Apartheid, have chosen adult learning as one of their key strategies to reconstruct and transform their societies and to improve the human resources and vocational capacities of their adult populations.

While many of these adult education strategies are informed by democratising intentions they are being increasingly forced to adapt to the harsh requirements of the global market and to produce a workforce with the necessary skills to compete in national and global markets. This is often at the expense of the unemployed and underemployed, many of whom live in informal settlements and rural areas. In many countries there is therefore a tension between adult education for jobs in the competitive global context and the wider vision of adult learning for all, in all areas of life.

Erosion of the nation state

The world is everywhere experiencing a progressive erosion of the welfare state, although with the growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots, welfare states are more necessary than ever. In order to deal with this situation it is necessary to create a new generation of political leaders able to promote civic literacy, develop human-centred social and urban agendas and create a climate in which people can deal more knowledgeably with the new local and global challenges. Civic education must start with schools and be integrated into community work and adult learning. It is important not only to have vocational skills and a job but to have the political skills to sustain a viable democracy. Above all, adult learning is a tool that can help to:

- encourage learners to understand and debate injustices in the context of the new world economic and political order;
- overcome biases and discriminatory practices;
- deal with the new technological developments;
- promote greater opportunities for women and minorities, and equality and justice for everyone;
- enhance international understanding;
- promote understanding of different cultures and economies particularly those in which a subsistence mode of living is essential to culture and survival.

The crucial role of adult learning in addressing the key issues confronting societies

Adult education has now firmly established itself as a separate discipline and field, complementary to initial education. The number of persons enrolled in adult learning programmes is fast catching up with the number of children in traditional school systems. This is a result of a response to the rapidity of change and emergence of reflexive societies.

Yet experience at the local, regional, national and international levels clearly indicates that this new educational reality has not yet been adequately integrated into the policy-making process.

An important task for adult learning on the threshold of the 21st century is to enable learners to see the present global transformations in a historical perspective and to understand that such periods of profound change bring not only positive developments but also dangers and catastrophes. The beginning of the present century was marked by enormous political tensions, civil war and world wars. In the same way, the changes being experienced currently are not a neutral technological process of change but run the risk of sweeping whole communities aside. Recognition of these negative developments needs to inform current and future practices and policies in the education of adults.

Promoting political skills and active citizenship

There is an increasing tendency for adult learning policies to move in the direction of promoting and updating vocational skills only. While the acquisition and the enhancement of such skills is important, it is also essential to have a wider vision of adult education, concerned with active citizenship, social rights and responsibilities, work and local communities. In fact there should be no contradiction between these two approaches. Adult learning should both prepare people for the world or work and promote the development of an informed, knowledgeable and reflective citizenship.

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Networking among adult learning initiatives

States are increasingly tending to withdraw from many of their welfare responsibilities. It is necessary for people involved in adult learning programmes to collaborate with others at local, regional and international levels.

New roles of adults

Adults are taking on new functions, responsibilities and have new learning aspirations in their capacities as workers, citizens, community workers, parents and family members. Research is showing that there are common activities, knowledge and skills that cut across all those roles. Critical thinking is not only important for the world of work but also for someone in the role of parent and community member. Adult learning should be re-conceptualised to focus on higher level transformative competencies, and not just on vocational skills.

A broader view of adult learning

Education is more than the acquisition of skills, and more than formal education. It includes informal and non-formal forms of learning, enabling adults to participate in political, economic and social decision-making processes and to become active agents of change. The focus of conventional education on individuals is insufficient to deal with the immensity of change. Families, institutions, communities, societies and cultures as active learning environments are central to the transitions to the communications and information age.

Policy strategies

Adult learning policies will be relevant only if they take into account the magnitude, depth and force of global changes. We need a multi-layered policy strategy of adult learning which has a two-pronged approach, taking into account both globalisation and diversifying tendencies. It must respond to social and economic transformations by enabling people to cope with the changes that are accompanying the introduction of new technologies. On the other hand it must empower people to become active subjects in the transformations of their own societies.

Local groups should be consulted in policy-making. For nearly two generations now, adult learners and educators in all parts of the world have been at work, developing adult education programmes and linking local groups with partners from public, private and voluntary sectors. Their experience needs to be used as a resource for dealing with the transformations and for generating new forms of policy making – both structural and programmatic. There is need to develop a symbiotic relationship between policy and grassroots action.

Adult education policy strategy should design contents which uphold basic values. These should include human rights of women, indigenous peoplesand peoplewithdisabilities.Programmes,researches and networks should be built around these basic values.

Conclusion

1 The present global transformation is far from being an equitable and sustainable development.

2 The kind of issues we are dealing with are not technical or curricular ones. They deal with structural, legislative and distributive processes, at the local, national and international level.

3 The existing models of adult learning have to be reviewed to meet the new challenges and social demands. The choice is not between education for retraining or for citizenship. It is between passive adaptation and creative participation at work as well as in civil and private life. For this, many kinds of training are needed – management, professional and vocational, information technology, languages, social, economic and political awareness and problem-solving.

4 Local experiences should guide practice and policy. It is the diversity and extensiveness of adult learning which is the most important resource in any future policy strategy. The involvement of local resources and local groups in a bottom-up process rather than a top-down process at the national, regional and global levels has become an urgent necessity. However the choice should not be between local and global. Both levels need to be combined.

5 It is increasingly important to share experiences and learn from others rather than painfully and slowly reinventing practices and knowledge.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 2

Improving conditions and quality of adult learning

Booklets under this theme:

a Universities and the future of adult learning
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e The politics and policies of the education of adults in a globally transforming society